

MiPO

esias



Tell us a story: What drew you to poetry in the first place? Why did you start writing?

Is there a statute of limitations for grade school thievery? I was in fourth grade and I borrowed a book from school that had poems in it. I was so enthralled by this book that I read it every night, and when it was time to return it, I hid it under my bed. My teacher sent a note home saying that if I didn't return the book, I'd have to pay for it. I denied any knowledge of the book, and my mother went to school and argued with the teacher saying that I would never steal a book, etc. etc. I remember feeling really scared that I'd be found out, yet I was willing to stand the heat. Even as a good student, poetry felt at the edge of "goodness," it brought out the bad girl in me, the one that didn't follow rules. But perhaps it's more complicated—writing poetry was something no one expected from me, it wasn't an "assignment," I found it myself, I kept it for myself. It still feels couched somewhere between an admirable, even nerdy, pursuit and a completely illicit one. As I re-read this, I think, "You hid it under the bed? Isn't that, like, the most obvious place to look?" Yeah, well, maybe I wanted to be found out. Or maybe this reflects poetry's private/public tensions.

ROSA ALCALÁ



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Which relationship is more important: Poetry and politics or poetry and philosophy? Why?

Important is a relative term. For whom? And at what time? And in what situation does it seem necessary to separate philosophy and politics and make explicit claims for or to promote a particular idea or policy? I teach a class on Spanish Civil War Literature and it seems that some of the poems from that time contain an explicit call to action, and others, even when committed to change, lean more towards an exploration of ideas or of human existence/consciousness. What's interesting to me is that some of those poems—wherever they fall in the spectrum—haven't lost their relevance, as either poetry or social statement. Just think of some of the incredible poets who wrote about the Spanish Civil War: Muriel Rukeyser, Edwin Rolfe, Langston Hughes, César Vallejo... Come to think of it, Vallejo's poems are their own philosophy, even those poems, like *España, aparta de mí este cáliz*, that are labeled political because they address an historical moment.

If you could spend a day with a living poet you admire, what would you do together? What might a passerby overhear?

When I think of the poet I am today, I think of the subtle shifts in my thinking and writing that first occurred while talking to, reading, and taking classes with Keith Waldrop. Some discussions took place while sitting in Keith's old office at Brown, before the building that housed the Creative Writing Department was made obsolete. I'd like to sit in that office again, listening to records and anecdotes. A passerby might hear Keith asking me what I think of Vicente Huidobro or Mina Loy. This time I'd have an answer.

Where will we see you and your work in five years?

Having fish tacos at a local restaurant, arguing over silly things—like whether to go on vacation or go to the mall—but we'll be on better terms because at least one of us will have made peace with never owning property.

Please describe your favorite poem or type of poetry.

Spongy: retains its shape when not used, expansive when put to the test. It's full of holes, yet isn't just full of air. Its form is crucial and complex, yet subtle, allowing for connections, disjunctions, entrances, and exits. There is no one center; there are many. This is perhaps just a poor metaphor for what Édouard Glissant calls a "poetics of relation," a reminder that poetry should reflect social, cultural, and historical complexities, difficulties, possibilities.

If you were able to place poetry in the world where it does not seem prominent, how would it behave there?

At the end of the night, it would quietly pick up the tab. But everyone will assume it was the guy flaunting his expense account.

ROSA ALCALÁ



At sixteen, Rosa Alcalá watched the paint factory next to her house catch on fire and shoot paint barrels 50 feet into the air. On the Fourth of July, when she was three, she cried at the sight of an Evel Knievel impersonator crossing the Great Falls of Paterson on his motorcycle. She currently resides in El Paso, Texas.

Preface

Breaking the cherished sound barrier (memory) was my uncle's plane.
The year of the experimental family. When I was born.

The Thing *after Steiner*

The thing becomes the thing
because of some speaking habit:
a moment of evolution
that coincides with the digging
of holes and proper burials
When we see who we are to each other,
we are social
But what we see, primitive
Monkeys cannot lie because they can't
imagine the not-occurred,
or moreso, the not-witnessed
We name
the body of designations:
we arrive at each other
and claim discovery
The root of my language is said
a forgery when another's house
is built bigger
and in proximity
The problem with chasing invention
is the wheel is its own perfect critic
To be the small dog tethered to the wagon
of some frontier
can only mean exhaustion

Class Consciousness in History #1

In a half-hearted attempt at objectivity, our frail protagonist releases the papers on her own abduction. Day three she declares, "No more Beef Wellington!"—but has moments of "Am I believable in a beret?" etc. A phone call cordially home to the handyman, and one evening, after being forced to watch other grainy abductions—all faux-realism and bank cameras—she notes: Everyone looks dashing.

Class Consciousness in History #2

(before)

We kill the German Shepherd
for foaming signs:

A perfect material anger. A thing like a troublesome toilet
or a neighbored body, contagious from too much stew.

We think English a cooling appliance, at times
a heat gun. Powered by a 19th century hydraulics,
it records its edges round.

A man on a boat hands his tools to a farewell party that doubles
as the welcoming crew.

(after)

The students here body effortlessly
Western expansion

plowing through a stead of language, unawares that
earlier in the caravan:

Every town betted the new act would hurdle into an
encrusted mine below.

A student nods off to Byron's metrical
wit. Another falls hard for the Lake Poets.

There's an oceanic riff in the hope for new forms: the pleasure
for these bodies is not the jagged border of bliss,

but a clean goal ahead, a neat tape measure

Assemblage

To pitch hunger at a Romanic site is to learn
boys are rootless, boys are bullets.

To learn to wink a decisive win is to
learn to fish for bread. This is the mirror
that pulls the girl out of the kid:

To desire against the construction of giants
before they are written into view
is to be nine.

To be nineteen, twenty-nine, almost eighty: every battle
is a lost battle, every camp, the enemy's.
Every kind man's a bluff.

Every wedding reception
a history of sick in-laws, of uncles who
cook. One brother's wife a political stake never to be
re-visited. Others, lost to dicey town halls: to name them
is to miss the point.

To read is to know the horse and the dame
are studded with codes and contraband, that the literacy
of the casino ended badly.

To tell a picture of a skirt, a sweater, is to have shoes in pure detail
fall beneath the fault line. To turn to a moment
before everyone married, then to everyone who's died.

To catch a whiff of this genetic drift is to witness
an offense and glamour. It is to say so much
of the thirties or nineties.

This is viney listening, it is the bulk
of flight. To follow the distribution of families
is to veer into a split-line of cancers, it is to think the real
pre-Atlantic.